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“The Fanatics in Grand Conclave”: The Rutland, Vermont, Free or Reform Convention of 1858



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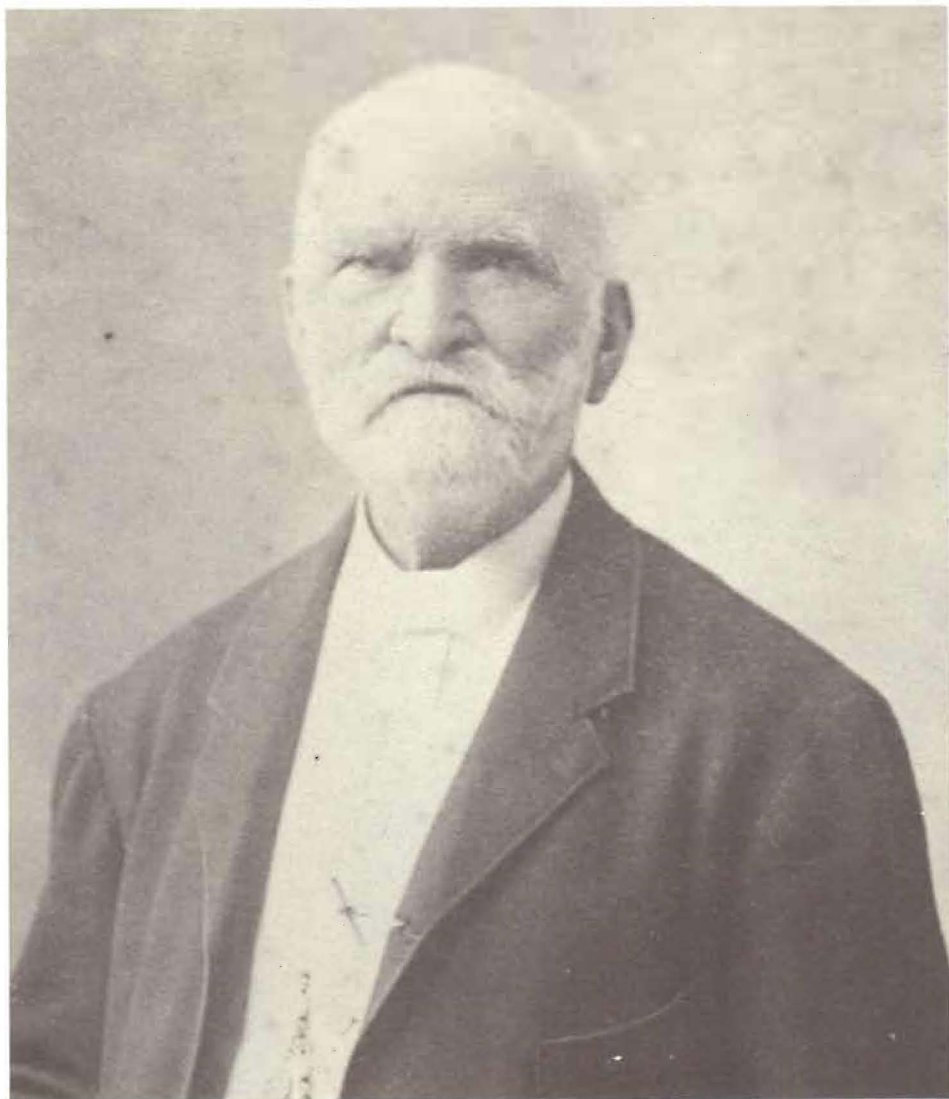


T. & R. ANNAN & SONS

Evans

Some of the principal participants at the Convention were: Ernestine L. Rose and Frederick W. Evans from New York, Rowland T. Robinson and Achsa Sprague from Vermont, and Parker Pillsbury from New Hampshire.

Convention Secretary Newman Weeks



BLITTSRSDORF

Rutland businessman Newman Weeks served as the convention's secretary and, in company with John Landon, was a local organizer of the event. Weeks was a respected merchant, insurance and real estate agent, and ticket agent for the Grand Trunk Railroad. His interest in the convention grew from his belief in Spiritualism. He carried on a correspondence with Plymouth's famous medium, Achsa Sprague and many of his letters are in the Sprague Collection at Vermont Historical Society.

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"The Fanatics in Grand Conclave": The Rutland, Vermont, Free or Reform Convention of 1858

by Dr. Thomas L. Altherr

In the summer of 1858, Rutland, Vermont, played host to probably the most unique gathering of moral reformers ever to assemble on the American continent. Perhaps New Hampshire abolitionist Parker Pillsbury described it best. Writing to William Lloyd Garrison on 30 June 1858, he remarked, "I am just returned from attending one of the largest and most important Reformatory Conventions ever held in this or any other country." After some chatty material on the amenities and hospitality at the Rutland Vermont Free Convention, Pillsbury delineated the range of the reformers' penchants: "The most prominent topics considered were Spiritualism, the Cause of Woman, including Marriage and Maternity, Scripture and Church Authority, and Slavery. Then the subjects of Free Trade, of Education, Labor and Land Reform, Temperance, Physiology and Phrenology were introduced, and more or less considered." Next he praised New Lebanon Shaker Frederick Evans for "a calm and clear exposition of the doctrines held by his denomination," Albany minister Amory Dwight Mayo for "a most eloquent and able address on the Bible," feminists Frances Dana Gage, Mary F. Davis, Eliza Farnham and George Sennott for speeches on behalf of Woman, the New York radical Ernestine Rose for "all her strength and noble earnestness." "How could we fail, then," he posed rhetorically, "of an occasion to be felt and remembered forever." One speaker, Henry Clarke Wright, seemed to embody the eclectic quality of the mix by himself: "H.C. Wright, of no State or country in particular; was also there, endeavoring to weave his broad robes of Righteousness out of Anti-Slavery, Non-Resistance, Temperance, the true laws of Marriage, Maternity, Education and the construction of the family." "Permit me to say, in a word," Pillsbury concluded, "that no Convention ever held in America could have had more Millennial hope and promise in it than this." Repeat it in each state and even the slave states would come shouting for reform, he conjectured.¹

In the quest for moral perfection that drew the energies of many reformers in the decades before the Civil War, those Americans sought the proper strategy and cause to bring on the projected millennium. Few single-issue radicals emerged, but many stressed one social evil or economic malady as the major obstacle to paradise regained. For many that was chattel slavery, for others excessive alcoholism or marital domination or male oppression of females or sexual expenditure, and yet for others dietary and nervous system problems seemed the root causes of national debility. To erase these severe smudges on the American moral self-image, reformers championed a flood of movements: abolition, antislavery, women's rights, the Cult of Domesticity, temperance, religious revivalism Second Great Awakening style, Free Love, passionlessness, spermatic economy, pacifism, celibacy, pantagamy, polygyny, transcendentalism and pantheism, associationism and Fourierist socialism, homeopathic, Thomsonian, and eclectic medicine, hydropathy, vegetarianism, phrenology, mesmerism and galvanism, law reform,

public education, conversion of indigenous people, and spiritualism. Some reformers sampled widely from this menu; others followed one or two through to the bitter end.²

Tactics used by the many movements to win followers varied from personal conversion to moral suasion to outright propaganda. Acutely aware of the power of the mass-distributed printed word, radicals provided tons of pamphlets, newspapers, and broadsides to the public, occasionally flooding the mails with petitions. In an age when lectures were a chief form of entertainment, the reformers hustled out on the lyceum circuit town to town. At times masters of the clandestine maneuver, at others, the purveyors of ultimate candidness, these enthusiasts kept their eyes on their main goals. Although most of them advocated and practiced Christian non-violence, many leaders, up until the Civil War, thought that violence had some value in convincing formerly marginal converts. Confrontational politics was a style few of them avoided. A few knocks from a mob served to strengthen a speaker's resolve. Paradoxically enthralling to the individual and predicating collective effort alike, reform movements both succeeded and foundered on these emotional drives.

Another arrangement becoming common to the age was the convention. Formalized gatherings of delegates and speakers in large, predetermined locales and arenas, often with thoroughly mapped out agendas, were ubiquitous by the 1840s. Whether or not a convention was the best mode of communication and persuasion drew some debate, but increasingly this organizational principle won the day. Reform-minded radicals had no monopoly on the convention process. Businessmen, politicians, ministers, military men, and promoters of conservative socio-economic institutions such as slavery, all convened regularly. Indeed it might not be too much of a stretch to see the rendezvous of the fur trade industry as a "convention." Reformers, then, when setting up their own conventions were breaking no new territory, but perhaps were adapting the tactics of the mainstream for their own ends.

Before 1858, American reformers assembled in numerous conventions to promote their specific causes. For example, for most of the years of the 1840s and 1850s, women's rights workers held national conventions. Abolition, temperance, and other movements had done likewise. Advocates at these conventions might have argued about appropriate strategies and at times some urged shifts to other causes, but mostly these gatherings have the impression of single-purposedness. Thus, when the melange of movers and shakers descended upon Rutland in June 1858, their arrival was a break in tradition. Such a mixed assemblage held out the possibility of extraordinary communication and cooperation or a dispiriting Babel.

Why Vermont? Why Rutland? Vermonters had claimed an independent streak all the way back to Ethan and Ira Allen and the Green Mountain Boys and had had plenty of what historian David Ludlow termed "social ferment" in the first half of the century. Abolitionism had attracted quite a few sympathizers in the 1830s. Future Mormon leaders Joseph Smith and Brigham Young had been born in the state, and Millerite founder William Miller and Oneida Community mastermind John Humphrey Noyes got their start there as well. Rutland itself had hosted a temperance convention in 1844, and for over thirty years a black minister, Lemuel Haynes, had

presided over a congregation there. Vermont boasted some resort spas, and Thomsonian botanist doctors ranged the region.³ On the other hand, however, residents had attacked radicals, mobbing abolitionist Samuel May in 1835 in Rutland. Due to business and agricultural shifts, many Vermonters had moved west. By the late 1850s, most Vermonters were in a more conservative moodswing. Farmers and businessmen emphasized boosterism and economic prosperity which they hoped the recent railway lines would bring. Reversing the trend of rural abandonment, Rutland's population had jumped from 3,000 to 7,633 inhabitants by September 1857.⁴ Even if the state was more hospitable for radical gatherings, the choice of Rutland still seemed curious, in that New York, Boston, or some other metropolitan area would have promised the reformers more crowds and more immediate media exposure. If they were looking to escape the hot cities, a common summer-time practice before the arrival of air conditioning, they found no relief in Rutland; all contemporary reports suggest it was blazing those three days.

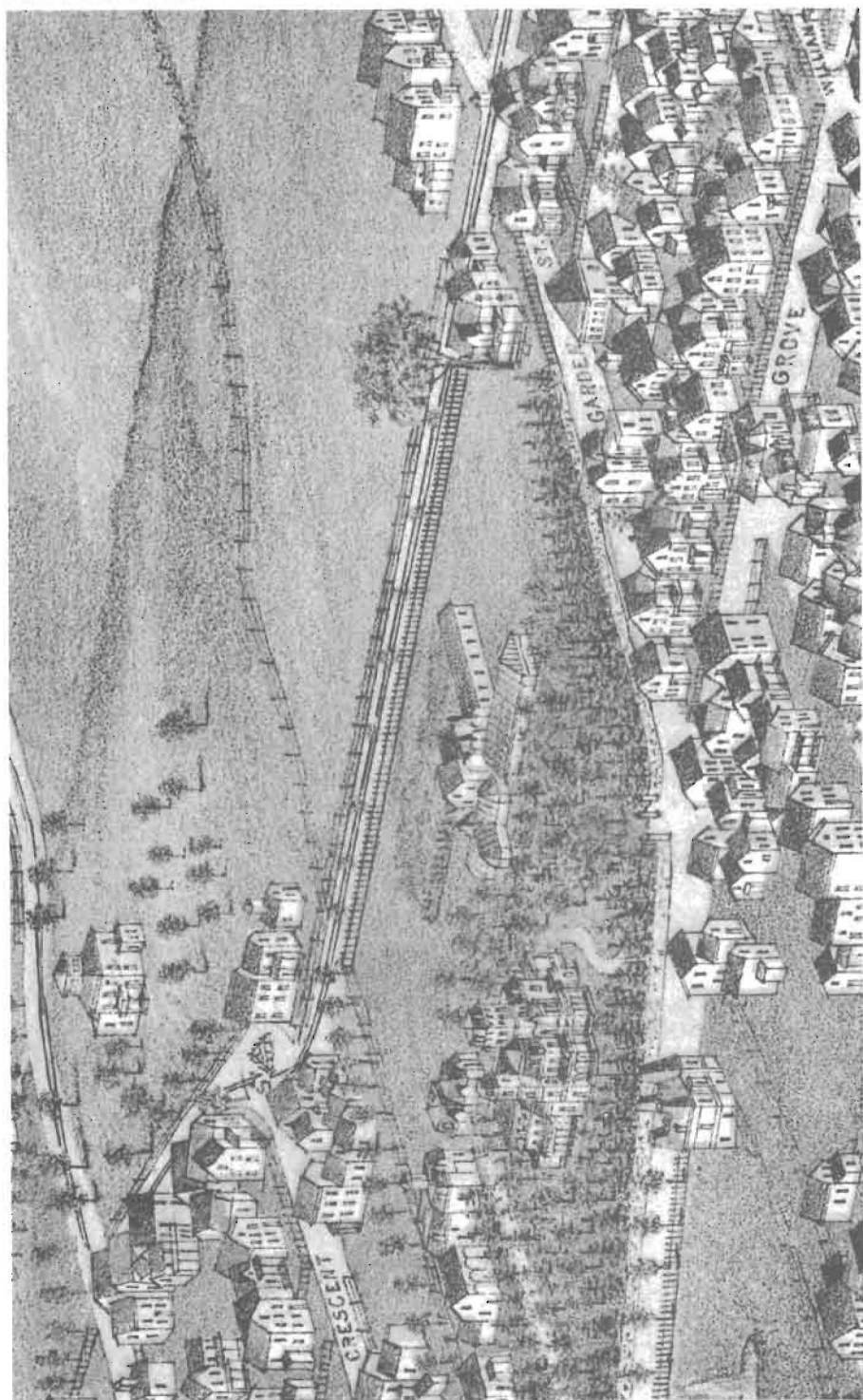
The germination of the idea for the convention is somewhat fuzzy, but apparently Spiritualist groups in the Boston area or in Vermont, or both, envisioned the multi-group version. In late May a call went out for "Friends of Human Progress" to assemble in late June in Rutland. Over 150 Vermonters, most from the western stretch of the state, signed the petition. Rutland businessman John Landon and merchant Newman Weeks appear to have been the chief contact persons in the town, but others such as Burlington educator John R. Forrest and Glens Falls, New York, minister Jason F. Walker also took an active role. But seemingly it was the Spiritualist contingent that engineered the effort. Many newspaper accounts after the event remarked about the predominance of that religious movement at the convention.

The Rutland organizers secured much local cooperation in staging the event. The *Spiritual Age* for June 12th gave the details.

Ample accommodations will be made to feed and lodge all who may be desirous of attending the Convention. Arrangements have been made with the different railroads to carry for half fare. Special trains will be run on the Rutland and Burlington, Rutland and Washington, and Western Vermont roads. Our friends from Boston and vicinity who wish to be at the Convention on the morning of the first day, will buy their tickets through Rutland, and take the P.M. train Thursday, June 24th. On the Cheshire Railroad they will be furnished with return checks from Rutland to Fitchburg. Those who leave Boston on the first train Friday morning, will arrive in Rutland at 2:30 P.M. Rooms and board have been secured at hotels, boarding houses, and in private families, from 50 cents to \$1.25 per day. Those wishing to engage rooms beforehand will please make application by letter to John Landon and Newman Weeks, General Committee.⁵

The committee erected a large tent, "one hundred feet in diameter," "on the vacant lot [on the] east side of Grove street." The group expected five thousand in attendance.⁶

Although organizers were disappointed that Garrison and Wendell Phillips bowed out of the event, even though they had signed the call, the convention attracted an array of well-known speakers, veterans of reform sorties as far away as Missouri. William Goodell, a moderate abolitionist



Pictorial map showing Baxter Estate, Grove Hall, which later occupied the convention site.

who had worked with the Liberty Party in the 1840s, came representing the American Antislavery Society. Of a more aggressive abolitionist bent came Stephen Symonds Foster and Parker Pillsbury. The "Poughkeepsie Seer," Andrew Jackson Davis, and his equally talented Spiritualist wife, Mary, headed the Spiritualist attractions. Editors Joel Tiffany and Samuel Brittan and famed local Vermont medium Achsa Sprague helped round out the cast. Feminists Frances Dana Gage, Julia Branch, Eliza Farnham, and Ernestine Rose added female moral passion. Frederick Evans of New Lebanon, New York, pitched in for the Shaker perspective and Elder Miles Grant kept the Millerite hopes alive. And, of course, the ubiquitous Henry Clarke Wright knitted all the causes together.

Although space would preclude any extended discussion of the Vermont participants here, many were farmers and merchants, most of whom apparently were Spiritualists. Several such as Gibson Smith of Shaftsbury, Samuel Davis of Bethel, Dennis Chapin of Huntington, and abolitionist H.P. Cutting of Castleton were Universalist ministers. Joshua Young, another minister, a Congregationalist but more of a Unitarian, from Burlington, became more famous the next year for delivering the eulogy at the funeral of John Brown of Harper's Ferry. A number of alternative medicine practitioners, such as Jacob Holt of Bridgewater, William Hopkins of Vergennes, Ezra Edson of Manchester, and Selah Gridley of Castleton, joined up as well as did dentist Seth Blake of Bellows Falls. Some, such as Augustus and Cyrus Armstrong of Dorset, were probably longtime abolitionists. Rowland T. Robinson, of Ferrisburgh, had gained fame or notoriety for Underground Railroad activities. Emily Cogswell of Middlebury, just one of many women involved, and Hosea Doton of Pomfret represented the teaching profession. Large contingents of signers were from the Burlington and Bennington regions. These included several merchants and farmers of some definite affluence, according to census records. Far from reflecting a ragtag bunch of tattered radicals, this cross-section of Vermonters consisted of many solid-citizen types, several of whom had held civic offices.

Rutland itself and the surrounding county accounted for a goodly number of petition signers. In addition to John Landon and Newman Weeks, these included Robert T. Aldrich, a hotelkeeper, and his wife Thankful, Otis Bardwell, B.F. Colby, Benjamin French, a farmer and later a merchant, E. Hanson, Albert Landon, later a bookkeeper for hardware dealer Walter Landon, W. W. Russell and Mrs. Lovina Russell, and Levi White, a farmer. One Rutlander went on to more fame and prosperity. John W. Cramton [misspelled Crampton on the petition] was a tinware manufacturer, who later became proprietor of the Bardwell House, town selectman, senator to the state legislature, director of the state prison and house of corrections, president of the Baxter National Bank of Rutland, president of the Steam Stone Cutter Company, president of the True Blue Marble Company, vice-president of the Vermont State Agricultural Society, director of the Gray National Bank, director of the State Horse Breeders' Association, vice-president of the Howe Scale Company, and by 1889, administrator of ten estates and landlord, as well as being a farmer and cattle buyer. In that year, the *Burlington* (Vt.) *Free Press* labeled him the "most 'official' person in the State."⁷

Newman Weeks, a life and fire insurance and real estate agent, a justice of the peace, notary, ticket agent for Grand Trunk Railroad, and merchant

dealing in furniture and upholstery goods, may have been the Rutlander most involved in the Spiritualism movement. In a few letters to Plymouth medium Achsa Sprague, Weeks left record of his enthusiasm. On 15 April 1858, he told her of Burlington bookkeeper William H. Root's recent "waking up" to Spiritualism.⁸ A few weeks after the reform convention, Weeks gushed to Sprague about his Women's Rights politics: "So you see I am practically a 'Woman's Rights Man,' and not only that but a 'Human Rights Man.' I hope the time is not far distant when Women will stand up in their womanhood on a perfect equality with men, & no longer submit to be deemed *inferior*, or the mere *appendages* to the 'Lords of Creation'."⁹ By the end of October, however, he was lamenting to her about the stagnancy of Spiritualism locally: "There is nothing going on now in Vermont remarkably interesting in the line of spiritual growth."¹⁰ And a month later, reflecting on a reform conference in Utica, New York, Weeks declared it as "not quite equal to the Rutland Convention."¹¹ As late as 1867 Weeks was still active in Spiritualism, as he called a national convention to order in Cleveland that September.

From around Rutland County there were other signers. Fair Haven residents included Joseph Adams, a marble dealer; W. Harrison, a master carpenter; C.P. Hill, a grocer; Alphonso Kilborn, a woolen flannel mill owner; Seth Thompson, a school teacher, insurance agent, school superintendent, and justice of the peace; Dr. Thomas Wakefield, an allopathic physician; John J. Williams, a marble worker; and John D. Wood, a stone sawyer. A Willard Allen who signed the petition may have been William Allen, also a marble dealer from Fair Haven. The Danby contingent was even larger, consisting of Austin Baker, a dairy farmer who had also been a teacher and school superintendent; his wife Betsy; from the same family Edia, a storekeeper and carpenter, and his son Joel, who would study law, become a teacher, fight in the Civil War, and become an attorney; Emily Green, a teacher; Peleg Griffith, a beekeeper and lumberman; Mrs. J.C. Griffith; George Kelly, a marble mill owner and his wife; Israel Thompson, a farmer; his sons, Henry and John; and Mrs. Francis Thompson, who was possibly a Free Lover. Clarendon contributed Dr. Henry S. Brown, a Spiritualist writer; Benjamin Fisk, a farmer, Josiah French, another farmer, who inked the call, but died June 8th three weeks before the convention; his daughter, Mary; Elijah Holden, a clairvoyant who had worn many other hats as a postmaster, cider mill owner, farmer, and painter; and Ruel Parker, a tavernkeeper; Philetus P. Clark, a farmer from Ira, and Harvey Homes, a farmer from Westhaven, also signed. John and Sarah Horton, of a Sudbury farm family, joined in the call; she was a Spiritualist. From Pittsford, signers numbered Sidney P. Griswold, a farmer who had been a postmaster and selectman; Thomas Ketchum, an allopathic physician and farmer; Ezra Smith, who became a physician; and four members of the Hendee family, Charles, a cattle breeder, farmers Solomon and German, and either Lafayette or Louis, both of them laborers.

Opening the convention on June 25th, Jason Walker exhorted the assembled speakers and crowd to treat the occasion as a "free platform" and to observe toleration toward different viewpoints: "They who would be reformers of their fellows should always be charitable." Albert Landon, of Rutland, then offered a set of resolutions which the Business Committee had drafted. Sweeping far and wide, the pronouncements declared the individ-

ual's authority "absolute and final," condemned slavery, espoused Spiritualism, opposed war and capital punishment, celebrated marriage based on "exclusive conjugal love," defended a woman's right to choose if and when to bear children, praised free trade and land reform, challenged churchly rights to enforce the Sabbath and biblical justification, and finished with six fairly vague statements on the moral improbability of mankind, the last of which wondered whether or not "time and devotion spent on religious service" was of any benefit.¹² Rather than summaries of the reformers' positions, these tenets served as the starting points for the debates. Over the next three days, despite Walker's hopes for total congeniality, the divergent opinions surged back and forth across the rostrum.

Henry Clarke Wright arose first to take on the very last resolution. An itinerant minister of sorts, Wright agreed that physical structures like churches should not confine worship, but pleaded for Christian sentiments to prevail. This touched off some brief remarks by others on the costs of churches and the possibilities of salvation. On those weighty topics the gathering adjourned to the afternoon.¹³ After repast and refreshment, Wright picked up the mantle again and delivered a long address on the first resolution, thumping hard for the individual's rights and responsibilities: *"I must be responsible, individually and alone, for my opinions and practices."*¹⁴ Samuel B. Brittan, the Spiritualist editor, then held forth on the "natural evidences of immortality," triggering a teeter-totter of responses from Millerite Elder Grant and Spiritualists in the audience. Another well-known Spiritualist editor, Joel Tiffany, followed with a rather abstruse and seemingly pointless disquisition on organization in nature and religion. Such was enough to exhaust the afternoon session.¹⁵ In the evening Amory Dwight Mayo, the Albany minister, attempted to call the radicals back into the conventional Christian fold with an appeal to the sanctity of the Bible. William Goodell and Stephen Symonds Foster arose to rebut Mayo, but the convention president overrode them, and the day closed with presentations by the two Vermont trance mediums, Helen Temple of Bennington and Achsa Sprague of Plymouth.¹⁶

On the second day of the conference, matters began rather innocuously with a talk by Dr. H.S. Brown of Clarendon, Vermont, on the need for a just government to regulate the affairs of individuals, a refutation of Henry Clarke Wright's position.¹⁷ But then things swung into high gear when New York feminist Julia Branch delivered an impassioned oration on the conditions of married women and offered a resolution that stunned the crowd: "That the slavery and degradation of woman proceed from the institution of marriage, that by the marriage contract, she loses control of her name, her person, her property, her labor, her affections, her children, and her freedom."¹⁸ As Luisa Cetti, one of only a handful of scholars to examine the Free Convention, argued in an unpublished paper, this resolution catapulted the convention in a Women's Rights direction, perhaps further than most feminists desired at the time, adding in a "Free Love" dimension that many of those assembled detested. Newspapers, particularly *The New York Times*, which devoted the entire front page of its June 29th edition to the convention and Branch's speech, characterized the meeting as a Free Love extravaganza. This was an inaccurate, if not downright unfair assessment, but as other current anti-Free Love stories, such as one about an alleged seduction

among the Berlin Heights, Ohio, Free Lovers showed, hostility toward that set of ideas was rampant.¹⁹

Stephen Symonds Foster attempted to soften the declaration by advocating marriage "*based upon the perfect principle of perfect and entire equality*," a notion he probably thought described his own marriage with Abby Kelley Foster. But others such as Joel Tiffany jumped up to attack the Free Love ideas right away.²⁰ Ernestine Rose set about to smooth things over by asserting that Branch did not mean "to let loose the untamed passions either of men or women," and made her own observations on the deprivations women suffered in too many marriages.²¹ Shaker Frederick Evans leaped forth to encourage the conventioners not just to control but crucify their lusts.²² This topic of marriage drew responses from the next three speakers. Eliza Farnham, in the midst of a general analysis of women's rights, injected her points that women had endured abuses within marriage too long and that rebellion was in their hearts. Having abandoned a loveless marriage of his own, Henry Clarke Wright echoed the claims about prison-like marriages. And Ohio feminist Frances Dana Gage redirected the discussion to the matter of marital property rights and championed continuing reforms in that area.²³ Thus the morning session drew to a close.

That afternoon the abolitionist proponents got their turn. Parker Pillsbury pitched in strongly to embellish his claim that "slavery is the sin and crime of our country." Calling for an interpretation of the Constitution to eradicate slavery, William Goodell joined his fervor to Pillsbury's.²⁴ Stephen Symonds Foster raised the ante further, charging as a thoroughgoing "come-outer" and disunionist that "any law, constitution, court, or government, any church, priesthood, creed, or Bible, any Christ, or any God, that, by silence or otherwise, authorizes man to enslave man, merits the scorn and contempt of mankind."²⁵ By the time the discussion revolved around to Henry Clark Wright, he must have been close to frothing in agreement, as he took the podium. "Down, then, with all Constitutions and Unions--," he thundered, "down with all churches, religions, and Bibles - down with all Christs and all Gods, that cannot exist without enslaving or killing men! Let man be sacred! Perish all Bibles, Christs and Gods, that would desecrate him!"²⁶ But then other speakers widened the meaning of the word "slavery" and fulminated on the slavery of mental bigotry or the tyranny of the body over the mind, ending the session with a re-affirmation of the individual's rights.²⁷

After the dinner break, the evening session returned to the theme of Women's Rights. George Sennott of Boston averred that women should take a vital place in reform movements, because, emphasizing the assumed ideal of passionlessness, he reckoned their moral superiority suited them well for the tasks: "For though the man's crimes do spring from unprincipled passion, it is a fact as well known as any fact can be, that on the part of the woman, there is no passion whatever....Women are not sensual; they abhor sensuality, and when they become independent, it will be one of the first things swept away, whether in marriage or out."²⁸ Mary Davis, the Spiritualist wife of Andrew Jackson Davis, closed out the segment with a speech underscoring Sennott's remarks as well as those by other feminists earlier in the convention.²⁹

By Sunday, the 27th, however, many Spiritualists were expressing dissatisfaction with the twists and turns of the discussions. Apparently, according to Pillsbury, some wished to disband and hold a concurrent Spiritualist-oriented conference. But Andrew Jackson Davis interceded and kept them with the main body, which by that time was approaching about 3,000 spectators.³⁰ After some morning time debate on the merits of free trade and a proposition to remove Christian teachings from public schools by Rutlander John Landon, Davis and the Spiritualists took over. Rehearsing his favorite points about harmonial forces in the universe, Davis argued for Spiritualism as a "door to my acceptance of the various reforms for which this Convention has assembled," as "a broad and glorious triumphal archway leading in all directions into freedom, and a universal enjoyment of a heaven in the world."³¹ Frederick Evans then spoke on the Shaker doctrines of physical and spiritual simplicity and celibacy to wrap up the session: "A celibate life, community of goods, separation from earthly governments, abolition of oaths, of war, of slavery, of poverty, and a sinless, innocent life."³²

Evans may have been a hard act to follow, for the concluding evening session account reads like a denouncement. A Mr. Markham held forth on "natural rights" briefly, and then Elder Grant launched into an attack on Spiritualism, declaring that "communications purporting to come from departed human spirits proceed from demons, and lead directly to skepticism, sensualism, and a rejection of the doctrines of the Bible." Grant promptly found himself locking horns with Joel Tiffany until both exhausted their points of view.³³ Thomas Curtis and Stephen Symonds Foster offered up the obligatory commendations to the organizers, the Harmonists from Troy, New York, who had provided intermission singings, and to the people of Rutland, most of whom must have been as drained by the conference as were the participants.³⁴

For weeks after the Rutland Convention newspapers as far away as Kansas and New Orleans printed reports and editorials about the transpirings. Only a few treated the event neutrally or positively. The Spiritualist newspapers, such as *Banner of Light* and Brittan's *The Spiritual Age* printed lengthy versions of the debates. Similarly *The Liberator* and *The National Anti-Slavery Standard* carried reports and letters-to-the-editor, the former into early September.³⁵ All the other newspaper accounts savaged the conference. Some took the strategy of dissociating the meeting from its location, wondering how such a thing could have ever befallen Rutland. For example, the Bradford (Vt.) *Aurora of the Valley* opined: "Why these heterodox people should select such a peaceful, retired and virtuous locality as Rutland, as the scene in which to ventilate their horrid doctrines we are at a loss to tell." "The town of Rutland is now being smitten as with a plague," pronounced the St. Johnsbury (Vt.) *Caledonian*. Similarly the *Burlington Free Press* consoled, "We do not wonder that the decent people of Rutland were annoyed at the presence of the Convention, for we do not remember to have read of a greater exhibition of mingled nonsense, indecency, insanity, and blasphemy, than appears to have been made by it."³⁶ Several other newspapers employed attacks on the speakers' personal characteristics, real or imagined. The Jackson (Ms.) *Mississippian Daily Gazette* referred to a convention "composed of masculine females and feminine males." "Female Plug Uglies" was the headline in a Fayetteville, (Tn.) *Observer* piece. A few stories, such as

one in the Albany (N.Y.) *Evening Journal* took pleasure in describing physical characteristics of Eliza Farnham, Frances Dana Gage, and Julia Branch, to their detriment.³⁷

Most of the newspaper accounts, however, expressed dismay over the ideas of the conference. "Such miserable stuff as this must create intense disgust in the minds of all reasonable people," blasted the Portland (Me.) *Advertiser*, "and this will work its own cure. We have no fear of seeing such revolting doctrines made popular so long as they are presented in their hideous deformity." The Davenport (Ia.) *Iowa State Democrat* chimed in: "What a happy meeting of all that is mean, all that is disgusting, all that is impudent, all that is sacrilegious." "If the permanent lady residents of Rutland had taken their broomsticks and chased some of these hot-heads out of New England, they would have effected a greater 'reform' than all the conventions in the Union could accomplish," spouted the Youngstown/Canfield (Oh.) *Republican Sentinel*. The prize for cleverness probably goes to the Wheeling (Va.) *Intelligencer* for its ridicule of the topics: "While their hand is in, why not introduce some resolutions defining the precise position of the Convention on the old hen question, the diagnosis of stump-tail milk, the pathology of pork, and the peregrinatory processes of green cheese."³⁸

What impact overall then did the Rutland Free Convention make on the United States of 1858 other than stirring up editors? Trance medium Achsa Sprague thought that the conference had been beneficial for reform movements overall. Writing about the Utica reform conference of September, 1858, which she had recently attended, Sprague declared, "Had I ever doubted the utility of the Rutland Convention, I should have seen its proof here, in the greater feeling of fraternity, with which reformers of all branches, approached each other in joint efforts for the good of Humanity. There was less effort to ride hobbies at the expense of others[,] more toleration, as though they had profited by the mistakes there [Rutland], and saw better their relation toward each other."³⁹ Yet few of the participants referred back to their inclusion. Some of the nationally known radicals such as Wendell Phillips, Garrison, Theodore Parker, and Theodore Dwight Weld, the Grimke sisters, Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Lucy Stone, the Fox sisters, Horace Greeley, and the Tappan brothers had not joined in the conference nor left any reaction to it. Aside from the moderate debate in the abolitionist and Spiritualist newspapers, the convention left little mark. It didn't sway the major political parties overtly, nor did it bring on nor halt the tide toward civil war. The state of Vermont did enact a staunchly abolitionist measure, "An Act to Secure Freedom to All Persons within this State" in November 1858, but even that law's connection to the Rutland Convention is unclear.⁴⁰ Was the convention then just some sound and fury in backwater Vermont?

The Rutland gathering may not have made earthshaking changes in Americans of that day, but it still serves as a barometer of the prejudices and passions that simmered then, as a crazy-quilt paradigm of the reaches of reforms afoot, and as an example of the internecine bickering among the reformer wing. Moreover, even though editors lambasted the Rutland conclave, the convention movement hardly died out. For years afterward, reformers continued to assemble in convention form as if it were the most

natural of activities. Similarly, although the speakers may not have referred to the Rutland affair afterwards, it still was part of the relentless process of being a radical in those tumultuous decades, yet one more baptism under fire for unpopular causes. It is tempting, but probably overstating the case, to see the meeting, its speakers and its ideas as prophetic, pointing the way to later times when Americans would normalize several of their platforms. Or, perhaps historian Louis Filler was closer to the truth with his commentary about the reformers: "It was as though these restless perfectionists were convening for all but the last time—at least as a coherent body—before civil war made largely irrelevant their configuration of causes."⁴¹ But the scenario arises immediately of Henry Clarke Wright leaping to his feet, along with the other "fanatics in grand conclave," to debate that point yet one more time.⁴²

NOTES

1. Parker Pillsbury to William Lloyd Garrison, reprinted in *The Anti-Slavery Bugle*, 10 July 1858, 1.
2. Historical summations of the antebellum reform movements are numerous, but two useful, brief monographs are Ronald A. Walters, *American Reformers 1850-1860* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1978) and Steven Mintz, *Moralists and Modernizers: America's Pre-Civil War Reformers* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1995).
3. David M. Ludlum, *Social Ferment in Vermont 1791-1850* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1939). See also Wilbur H. Siebert, *Vermont's Anti-Slavery and Underground Railroad Record* (Columbus, OH: Spahr and Glenn, 1937); John L. Myers, "The Major Effect of Antislavery Agencies in Vermont, 1832-1836," *Vermont History*, v. 36 (September 1968), 214-229; Reinhard O. Johnson, "The Liberty Party in Vermont, 1840-1848: The Forgotten Abolitionists," *Vermont History*, v. 47, n. 4 (Fall 1979), 258-275; Randolph A. Roth, "The First Radical Abolitionists: The Reverend James Milligan and the Reformed Presbyterians of Vermont," *New England Quarterly*, v. 55 (December 1982), 540-563; Louise B. Roomet, "Vermont as a Resort Area in the Nineteenth Century," *Vermont History*, v. 44 (1976), 1-13; and Harold A. Meeks, *Time and Change in Vermont: A Human Geography* (Chester, CT: The Globe Pequot, 1986).
4. Austin J. Coolidge and J.B. Mansfield, *A History and Description of New England, General and Local*, 2 vols. (Boston: Austin J. Coolidge, 1859), Vol. 1: *Maine, New Hampshire, and Vermont*, 894.
5. *The Spiritual Age*, 12 June 1858.
6. "The Free Convention," *Rutland Herald*, 25 June 1858, 2.

7. *Burlington Free Press*, 21 January 1889, 5.
8. Newman Weeks to Achsa Sprague, 15 April 1858, Achsa Sprague Collection, Vermont Historical Society, Montpelier, Vermont, Document Box #181, Folder 5.
9. Weeks to Sprague, 17 August 1858, Sprague Collection, Folder 6, Weeks' underlinings.
10. Weeks to Sprague, 31 October 1858, Sprague Collection, Folder 7.
11. Weeks to Sprague, 26 November 1858, Sprague Collection, Folder 7.
12. J.M. Yerrinton, ed., *Proceedings of the Free Convention Held at Rutland, Vermont June 25th, 26th, and 27th* (Boston: J.M. Yerrinton, 1858), 8-10.
13. Ibid, 11-13.
14. Ibid, 14-23, quotation is from page 16; italics are Wright's or the editor's.
15. Ibid, 24-52.
16. Ibid, 43-50, 177-184.
17. Ibid, 50-52.
18. Ibid, 52-55; quotation is from 55.
19. Luisa Cetti, "The Radicals and the Wrongs of Marriage," unpublished paper presented at the Third Biennial Symposium of the Milan Group in Early United States History, "Making, Unmaking and Remaking America: Popular Ideology before the Civil War," Milan, Italy, June 1986.
20. Yerrinton, ed., *Proceedings*, 56-60; quotation is from 56; italics are either Foster's or the Editor's.
21. Ibid., 60-61.
22. Ibid., 61-63.
23. Ibid., 67-81.
24. Ibid., 82-93; quotation is from 82.
25. Ibid., 95-99; quotation is from 95.
26. Ibid., 100-101; quotation is from 101.

27. Ibid., 101-109.
28. Ibid., 109-119; quotation is from 118; italics are Sennott's or the editor's.
29. Ibid., 119-124.
30. Pillsbury to Garrison, *The Anti-Slavery Bugle*, 10 July 1858, 1.
31. Yerrinton, ed, *Proceedings*, 143-148; quotations are from 147-148.
32. Ibid., 151-159; quotation is from 159.
33. Ibid., 160-172; quotation is from 161.
34. Ibid., 172-173.
35. *The Liberator* featured material pertinent to the convention in its June 4th, June 11th, July 2nd, July 9th, July 30th, August 6th, August 13th, August 27th, and September 3rd issues. *The National Anti-Slavery Standard* paid somewhat less attention to it, including pieces in only its July 31st and August 21st numbers.
36. "Free Convention at Rutland," Bradford (Vt.) *Aurora of the Valley*, 3 July 1858, 2; "A 'Reform' Convention," St. Johnsbury (Vt.) *Caledonian*, 3 July 1858, 2; and Burlington (Vt.) *Free Press*, 30 June 1858, 2.
37. "Northern Wickedness and Fanaticism," Jackson (Ms.) *Mississippian Daily Gazette*, 14 July 1858, 3; "Female Plug Uglies," Fayetteville (Tn.) *Observer*, 8 July 1858, 2; and Albany (NY) *Evening Journal*, 2 July 1858, 2.
38. "A Convention of 'Moral Lunatics'," Portland (Me.) *Advertiser*, 6 July 1858, 1; "'Isms' in Convention," Davenport, (Ia.) *Daily Iowa State Democrat*, 29 June 1858, 2; Youngstown/Canfield, (Oh.) *Republican Sentinel*, 15 July 1858, 2; and Wheeling (Va.) *Daily Intelligencer*, 29 June 1858, 1. But probably the most vilifying prose appeared in the Nashville, (Tn.) *Union*, whose editorial the Concord, (NH) *Democratic Standard* reprinted in its July 24th issue, page one; the essay warrants some lengthy excerpting here:
 All the moral and political diseases which have afflicted society for many years past, recently broke out in a violent eruption at the "Reformers' Free Convention" at Rutland, Vermont. That unfortunate city seems to have been selected as a moral pest house on this occasion, where all the plagues that infest the world have congregated together, that they may engender some new and more loathsome leprosy. By a sort of affinity which exists in the social as well as the physical world, all forms of error and vice have been

attracted to revel and riot in these saturnalia of sin. Licentiousness scarcely concealing its hideous deformities under the robe of a false and disgusting philanthropy; Superstition, appealing to the worst passions and propensities of our nature and linked with the most degrading vices; infidelity, trampling upon the sacred shrines of religion; Abolitionism, insolently defying the obligations of human and divine law and substituting its own infamous doctrines for those eternal truths which the wisdom of our fathers have left us for our own guidance--these are the elements which mingled in that foul assemblage of pestilence and pollution----

These dangerous and destructive heresies have never flourished at the South. They cannot live upon our soil. They wither for want of sustenance in the purer, moral atmosphere that surrounds them here. They vanish, like morning mists, in the clearer light of our social and political philosophy. We have no fens of moral disease and pestilence, to nourish their rank and poisonous growth, no fetid pools of pollution in whose still and stagnant depths the germs of these social evils may be engendered.

39. "Notes by the Wayside," *The World's Paper*, 1 October 1858, 2.
40. "No. 37--An act to Secure Freedom to All Persons within this State," reprinted in H. Nicholas Muller, III and Samuel B. Hand, eds., *In a State of Nature: Readings in Vermont History*, Montpelier, Vermont: Vermont Historical Society, 1982), 191-192.
41. Louis Filler, *The Crusade Against Slavery 1830-1860* (New York: Harper and Row, 1960). 263-264.
42. The phrase in quotation marks, which also serves as the title of this essay, was the headline in the Springfield,(Ma.) *Republican* article about the convention, 28 June 1858, 2.

About the Author

Dr. Thomas L. Altherr is Professor of History and American Studies at The Metropolitan State College of Denver in Denver, Colorado. He holds a Ph.D. from Ohio State University and has published numerous articles on the history of baseball and hunting. He has long had an interest in Vermont history, and the Rutland Convention of 1858 has particularly captured his imagination. Dr. Altherr is a member of the Rutland Historical Society.